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DOI:

[10.1080/09608788.2018.1477732](https://doi.org/10.1080/09608788.2018.1477732)

Document Version

Peer reviewed version

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Citation for published version (APA):

Callanan, J. J. (2018). Methodological Conservatism in Kant and Strawson. *British Journal for the History of Philosophy*. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09608788.2018.1477732>

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Methodological Conservatism in Kant and Strawson

John J. Callanan

1. Introduction

One might describe philosophical strategies that have the aim of protecting certain first-order commitments against possible revision as *methodologically conservative*.¹ In contrast, a *methodological reformist* is one for whom there are no particular first-order claims that must be accommodated within a successful philosophical theory. The methodological conservative can measure the adequacy of a philosophical theory in terms of its capacity to accommodate certain first-order claims specified as privileged; the methodological reformist measures the adequacy of a philosophy theory in other ways, in terms of its explanatory simplicity or expressive power or by appeal to other internal theoretical virtues. Both Kant's transcendental idealism and Strawson's descriptive metaphysics, I claim, are methodologically conservative philosophical projects. Kant and Strawson are also famously both advocates of the use of transcendental arguments.² In this paper I examine the relations between their respective use of transcendental argumentation and their methodologically conservative approaches.

One can distinguish two senses of methodological conservatism relating to the *premises* and the *conclusions* of arguments respectively. In the first sense, an inquiry is methodologically conservative if it takes some substantial premise as assumed and unrevisable by any further reflection. In the second sense, an inquiry is methodologically conservative if its conclusions are such that they recommend that no revision of our already-established ways of thinking about the world is required. Kant's approach is methodologically conservative in both senses, I claim; Strawson's approach is methodologically conservative in the latter sense only. The difference between them hinges on whether substantial – indeed *a priori* – propositions are appropriately accommodated as premises in the course of philosophical argumentation. For Kant, the success of the inquiry depends on the conclusions being consonant with particular

¹ I am adapting the term from (Cowie 2015) who uses it in the context of metaethics.

² As will be seen I use Strawson as a representative of one way in which transcendental arguments can be deployed. For more extensive recent discussion of Strawson's relation to Kant see (Allais 2016; H. Allison 2016; Cassam 2016; Glock 2003; Gomes 2016; A. W. Moore 2016).

scientific commitments. For Strawson, the success of the inquiry depends on the independence of its results from any particular scientific commitments.

The transcendental form of argument is usually presented as argumentation that typically begins by identifying some uncontroversial initial premise accepted by a sceptical interlocutor and then showing that the interlocutor is committed to some more substantial philosophical claim by virtue of the fact that the more substantial claims constitutes a necessary condition of the uncontroversial initial premise. How the arguments actually function is a matter of some contention.³ It is usually acknowledged however that the initial premise such arguments involve some minimal claim regarding time-perception, or self-consciousness, or the mere coherence of experience, *etc.* The initial premise is supposed to be one that a rational interlocutor would be hard-pressed to deny without a performative contradiction, since their denial itself would seem to constitute a self-conscious coherent temporal experience. The arguments then aspire to show that substantial metaphysical concepts such as those of causation and substance must apply if the initial minimal claims are to be granted. The conclusions reached establish that there is a core conceptual scheme that must be in place for all human beings for representation of an objective world to be possible. One could say then that an *a priori* proposition (in the sense of a necessary truth not derived from experience) e.g. that all experience must be structured by a particular category, is reached as the *conclusion* of this form of transcendental argumentation. Insofar as the conclusion conforms with our ordinary ways of thinking about the world (e.g., of the world as causally-structured or containing substances that undergo change) the results are methodologically conservative.

A very different employment of transcendental argumentation is also at work in Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*.⁴ This strand takes as its initially accepted *premise* the actual

³ For discussion of transcendental arguments, see (Aquila 1976; Bardon 2005; Cassam 1987; Franks 2005; Stapleford 2008; Stern 1999, 2000, 2007; Stroud 1968, 1984; Vahid 2002)

⁴ Henceforth the 'First Critique'. References to Kant's other writings are to the Cambridge Edition series of Kant's works. Abbreviations used are as follows:

- (A/B) *Critique of Pure Reason*, ed. and trans. P. Guyer and A. Wood (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).
- (Negative) *Attempt to Introduce the Concept of Negative Magnitudes into Philosophy in Theoretical Philosophy 1775–1770*, trans. D. Walford and R. Meerbote (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992).
- (ID) *On the form and principles of the sensible and the intelligible worlds in Theoretical Philosophy 1775–1770*, trans. D. Walford and R. Meerbote (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992).
- (Inquiry) *Inquiry into the Distinctness of the Principles of Natural Theology and Morality in*

possession of *a priori* cognition in the form of mathematical and scientific propositions.⁵ This aspect of Kant's project is one whereby substantial theoretical commitments are made explicit at the start and the aim of transcendental argument is to explain their truth as it manifests within a comprehensive metaphysical framework.⁶ Strawson tries to rescue the value of Kant's project by jettisoning the latter's scientific commitments and assumption of *a priori* cognition as a premise, while retaining the idea of a core conceptual scheme that can be uncovered by way of transcendental argumentation. Kant developed a radically innovative conception of the nature of metaphysical concepts – *i.e.* that they were part and parcel of the essential structure of ordinary forms of representing a world – specifically as a means of providing the basis for explaining just how the assumed scientific truths were in fact true.

For Strawson, on the other hand, the ambition is different. Strawson's view is that some of the concepts we take for granted in our everyday thinking about the world are in fact a necessary part of any conceptual scheme capable of objective thought at all. This claim is, in Strawson's view, the crucial philosophical ambition inherited from Kant. For both Kant and Strawson, the use of transcendental arguments is closely tied to their methodologically conservatism. They are however methodological conservatives in

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- (MFNS) *Theoretical Philosophy 1775–1770*, trans. D. Walford and R. Meerbote (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992).
- (MFNS) *Metaphysical Foundations of Natural Science*, trans. M. Friedman, in *Theoretical Philosophy after 1781*, ed. H. Allison and P. Heath (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).
- (Physical Monadology) *The Employment in Natural Philosophy of Metaphysics Combined with Geometry, Of Which Sample I Contains the Physical Monadology*, in *Theoretical Philosophy 1775–1770*, trans. D. Walford and R. Meerbote (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992).
- (Prol.) *Prolegomena to any Future Metaphysics*, ed. and trans. G. Hatfield in *Theoretical Philosophy after 1781*, ed. H. Allison and P. Heath (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

Page references are to the standard Akademie edition of Kant's works, *Kants Gesammelte Schriften*, ed. Königlich Preussische Akademie der Wissenschaften, vols. 1–29 (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1902–). All references to Kant's work are to the Cambridge Editions. References to the First Critique will use the standard A/B pagination; all other works will use in Akademie reference.

⁵ For an interesting discussion of how to consider the role of apriority for Kant see (Politis 1997).

⁶ The question 'how are synthetic *a priori* judgments possible?' is not meant to ask *whether* such judgments are possible, since on this reading Kant held that their possibility is shown by their actuality. For an examination of the Transcendental Deduction along these lines, see (Edgar 2010). For readings whereby some substantive knowledge is assumed see (Ameriks 1978; Engstrom 1994). Which strand of argumentation is crucial for understanding Kant's transcendental idealism is a contested issue, however, as shall be discussed. For examination see (Ameriks 1978) reprinted in (Ameriks 2003) and (O'Shea 2011).

importantly different senses.⁷ In Kant's case the first-order claims that are immune to revision are those of mathematics and the sciences, and his means for explaining their non-revisability is to connect them with invariant structures in the mind. In Strawson's case the non-revisable claims are the everyday characterizations of the world themselves – his aim is just to secure the status of the ordinary invariances in our conceptual vocabulary regarding our perceptual experience of the world. The idea that the world with which we engage is a spatiotemporal continuum of objective particulars is itself the first-order claim that Strawson seeks to show to be immune to revision. This difference in aim entails a notable difference with regard to their attitudes to the status of scientific inquiry. Kant's project argues that whatever understanding of fundamental metaphysics emerges it must be one that can accommodate the actuality of scientific *a priori* cognition; Strawson's project argues that whatever understanding of fundamental metaphysics emerges it must be one that is independent of any particular scientific knowledge-claim. As such, they both employ transcendental argumentation to secure their methodological conservatism, but with opposed visions as to the relation of those results to one's scientific understanding of the world.

The paper will be structured as follows. In §2 I outline varieties of the scientific variant of methodologically conservatism, comparing and contrasting Euler and Kant's Pre-Critical use of scientific commitments for their philosophical aims. In §3 I briefly outline some of the familiar instantiations of this type of argumentation in the *First Critique*. In §4 I outline Strawson's descriptive metaphysics as presented in *Individuals* and *The Bounds of Sense*, as well as in later work. I argue that for Strawson the appeal of transcendental argumentation is its promise of identifying a core conceptual vocabulary of human minds that would be deployed in the face of any revision of our scientific

⁷ Methodological conservatism, whether in regard to premises or conclusions, is a distinct position from the mere advocacy of transcendental arguments in general. For one could feasibly have a methodologically conservative position regarding substantial and unrevisable *premises* that doesn't involve transcendental argumentation (e.g. G. E. Moore's proof of an external world (G. E. Moore 1939)); similarly, one could have a methodologically conservative approach regarding some *conclusions* that have been reached in some way other than by transcendental argumentation (arguably Hume's sceptical solutions to his own sceptical challenges in the *Treatise* involve a strategy of this sort – for discussion see (O'Shea 1996)). All transcendental argumentation is conservative with regard to *some* initial assumed premise of course, whether it is substantial or not, since this is what is supposed to generate the requisite anti-sceptical leverage. What constitutes a 'substantial' philosophical commitment is of course itself controversial, but for my purposes here it can be roughly determined in terms of what a rational interlocutor might be able to deny without the performative contradiction suggested above. Transcendental arguments need not be conservative with regard to their conclusions either: it is possible that the conclusions of such arguments are ones that recommended revision in our ordinary ways of thinking. I am grateful for an anonymous reviewer's pressing me for some much-needed clarification here.

worldview, precisely for the purpose of avoiding Kant's seemingly precarious dependence on particular scientific claims. In §5 I conclude with some suggestions of the different challenges regarding scientific theory that Kant and Strawson each face as a result of their deploying transcendental argumentation to the end of methodological conservatism.

2. Euler and the Pre-Critical Kant

Leonhard Euler begins his *Reflexions Sur l'Espace et le Tems* with a discussion of the role principles such as the First Law of Motion should play within philosophical discourse.⁸ Bodies at rest will remain at rest unless acted upon and bodies in motion will continue in motion unless acted upon. What is the *metaphysical* relevance of claims such as these? Such propositions, Euler states, are more well-founded and well-confirmed than any claim found within metaphysics. They also concern the essential character of bodies in nature, which is supposedly the proper object of metaphysical inquiry. It is furthermore a proposition that does not appear itself to be at all accessible through what he regarded as standard forms of philosophical reasoning, *e.g.* syllogistic reasoning involving premises from indubitable first principles. Euler proposes the following normative rule of inquiry:

[T]he awareness of these truths will be able to serve as a guide in these thorny investigations. For we shall be right to reject in this science all reasoning and all ideas that lead to conclusions contrary to these truths, however justified they may be elsewhere; and we shall be authorized to admit only principles that are consistent with these same truths. (Euler 1750, II)

Euler goes on to argue that we cannot characterise these propositions unless we consider them as expounding the notion of a body possessing position within a real absolute spatial framework. He argues that the spatial position of a body, construed as a mere relation to other bodies, is inconsistent with how spatial representation of a body is represented in mechanics.⁹ Yet since it is an indubitable methodological starting point

⁸ Originally published in the *Memoires de l'academie des sciences de Berlin* 4, 1750, pp. 324-333. I make use here of a translation by Michael Sacloido and Pater Wake, available at the Euler Archive (<http://eulerarchive.maa.org/pages/E149.html>.)

⁹ Euler claims that the relational (or, as Euler puts it, 'metaphysical') conception of space would entail that a body in water, whose position is determined by its immediately surrounding relations

that these scientific propositions constitute knowledge of *empirical reality*, Euler claims that we can infer the empirical reality of absolute space and time from such arguments. Thus any considerations metaphysicians might have that lead them to doubt the reality of space and time must simply be incorrect and ‘whatever sort of proof they bring forth to argue their opinion shall indeed be poorly grounded, and there will be some paralogism hidden in them’ (Euler 1750, XIV). For Euler, some scientific knowledge constitutes a non-revisable core of knowledge within the body of human knowledge in general. It is this third claim that is at work in Euler’s considerations above. For him no inquiry in metaphysics *could ever* come to displace or revise the known propositions of physics. Furthermore, this claim can subsequently be used to secure metaphysical results (he claims) alongside principles to the effect that we are committed to the objectivity of any metaphysical concepts necessarily deployed in the course of explicating the content of those propositions in physics.

Euler’s *Reflexions* were praised by Kant in his *Negative Magnitudes* essay in 1763 and again in his formative *Inaugural Dissertation* in 1770.¹⁰ Given it is well-known that Kant held that Euler’s examination of space and time constituted a welcome challenge to the Leibnizian analysis of space, one that positively influenced his own, it is worth considering whether and to what degree he endorsed the philosophical methodology on display there. In 1763 Kant supports Euler’s scientism. Kant first acknowledges the false hopes of basing the method of metaphysics on that of mathematics.¹¹ He claims, however, that this failure to use mathematics in terms of methodology has blinded many to the positive use of mathematics for philosophy – “the genuine application of its propositions to the objects of philosophy” (*Negative Magnitudes*, 2: 167 in (Kant 1992, 207)). Kant suggests that the relationship between metaphysics and mathematics has become needlessly antagonistic, in that the former has frequently ‘armed itself against’ the latter, by rendering mathematical concepts as “subtle fictions, which have little truth to them outside the field of mathematics”. Clearly the issue here concerns the proper referents of mathematical concepts and whether they relate to empirical reality or not. This is a misguided opposition, he suggests:

to the water around it, would retain its ‘position’ even when the water itself moved, a conclusion denied by the ‘mathematical’ analysis. I don’t evaluate the cogency of this argument here.

¹⁰ ‘Attempt to Introduce the Concept of Negative Magnitudes into Philosophy’ and *Concerning the Form and Principles of the Sensible and Intelligible World* (the ‘Inaugural Dissertation’), both in (Kant 1992). Kant nevertheless resists Euler’s conclusions at various points.

¹¹ For a discussion of the relationship between mathematical and metaphysical methodology in Kant, see (Callanan 2014).

It is not difficult to guess which side will have the advantages if two sciences enter into a dispute with each other, where the one excels all others in certainty and distinctness, while the other has only just started out on the path to these objectives. (*Negative Magnitudes*, 2: 167-8)

Kant's claim then is that the authority of mathematics and mechanics is not just with regard to the certainty of their propositions considered abstractly, but rather as characterizing *empirical reality*, i.e. the world as it is capable of being experienced. It is with regard to this battle that metaphysics is at a disadvantage, Kant maintains.

Kant uses the example of the nature of space as characteristic of the misguided methodological values of metaphysicians. Here there is a vast body of epistemically secure data points in the form of geometry to which metaphysicians could appeal in determining their inquiries. Instead Kant complains, "these data are ignored and one relies simply on one's ambiguous consciousness of the concept, which is thought in an entirely abstract fashion" (*Negative Magnitudes*, 2: 168). As Kant presents it then, metaphysicians' *modus operandi* is to begin with psychologically plausible intuitions – no doubt based on some perceptual observations of spatial properties and relations – and subsequently construct a theory of the nature of space itself. Ignoring scientific data is unwise in itself, Kant claims, but more egregious are the resulting manoeuvres made if the metaphysical theory is found to conflict with scientific data:

If it should happen that speculation, conducted in accordance with this procedure, should fail to agree with the propositions of mathematics, then an attempt is made to save the artificially contrived concept by raising a specious objection against this science, and claiming that its fundamental concepts have not been derived from the true nature of space at all, but arbitrarily invented. The mathematical observation of motion, combined with cognition of space, likewise furnishes many data, which are capable of keeping the reflections of metaphysics concerning time on the path of truth. The celebrated *Euler*, among others, has provided a stimulus to reflections such as these. But it seems easier to linger among obscure abstractions which are difficult to test, than to enter into relations with a science which only admits intelligible and obvious insights. (*Negative Magnitudes*, 2: 168)

Occasionally Kant notes, a theory faces a challenge in the form of its incompatibility with a body of knowledge of space in the form of geometry.¹² The proper procedure at this point, he implies, would be the rejection of the theory of space. Instead what happens is the downgrading of the status of geometry as revealing necessary truths about empirical reality. It is claimed instead that geometry tells us something of an idealized space, of space considered as a model, etc. that this idealized space does not reflect the nature of empirical reality and hence offers no opposition to the metaphysical theory of empirical space that the metaphysician is hawking. Kant tells us that the demand of metaphysics ought properly to be construed as that of vindicating a conception of empirical space that conforms with our known mathematical characterization of it. To abjure this criterion of falsification would be tantamount to renouncing testability as an epistemic norm itself.

Kant anticipates his so-called ‘Argument from Geometry’ in the *Inaugural Dissertation* with reasoning to similar effect.¹³ He considers the proposition that between two points there is only a single straight line, a proposition he takes to be true of empirical reality. While Euler had argued that the First Law of Mechanics could only be true if Space were ontologically real, Kant claims that geometrical propositions such as these could only be true if Space were a pure intuition (*Inaugural Dissertation*, 2: 403, in (Kant 1992, 396)). The development of Kant’s idealism tracks his focus upon argumentation such as this. He sees in the claim that space is itself a pure intuition a means of showing that the object with which the propositions of geometry are concerned is identical to the object with which we are concerning when we take ourselves to have a perceptual acquaintance with empirical reality. The reasoning employed is that space must be such an intuition, for were it not so then we would lack a metaphysical basis for connecting our way of being perceptually related to empirical reality to what we know to be the correct scientific characterization of it.

3. Critical Conservatism

Kant’s ambition in the Critical period is of course to return metaphysics to the status of a science (A viii-ix). Yet by ‘science’ here Kant may be connoting something not radically

¹² Kant is probably referring to a well-known geometrical proof of the infinite divisibility of space in Keill, see *Physical Monadology*, 1:478, in (Kant 1992) and *Inquiry*, 2:279, in (Kant 1992).

¹³ I discuss the Argument from Geometry in the following section.

different in spirit from that characterization found (for instance) in Wolff's *Preliminary Discourse on Philosophy in General*, that of "the habit of inferring conclusions by legitimate sequence from certain and immutable premises" (Wolff 1728/1963, II, §30, 17). Nothing in this conception of 'science' commits Kant to scientism understood pejoratively. With regard to the role of scientific claims in metaphysical argumentation, however, I argue that it is clear that Kant retains his view from the pre-Critical period and continues to hold a view similar to Euler's. For Kant, no metaphysical manoeuvres *could ever* displace the knowledge that the sum of the internal angles of a triangle are always equal to the sum of two right angles, or that change in a substance never entails an increase or diminution in the quantity of matter involved. Kant frequently states how such knowledge must be possible, since it is actual.¹⁴ Kant's metaphysical manoeuvres in the Critical Philosophy are on the contrary directed towards explaining *how* it is that such knowledge is possible, by providing philosophy grounds for explaining the nature of geometrical construction that accounts for Euclid's proposition I.32, or by providing a validation of the concept of substance that entails Lavoisier's law of the conservation of matter.

Philosophical inquiries such as these have the character of being methodologically conservative in character with regard to the premises of inquiry. Although this form of methodological conservatism has been introduced here in terms of its scientific variant, it should be obvious that it need not take that form of expression. I regard as methodologically conservative also any philosophical inquiry that takes its *modus operandi* the vindication of accepted propositions from some other domain. Perhaps claims such as 'I have two hands', or 'One must not treat human beings as mere objects', or 'I must sacrifice my son if God demands it' might constitute propositions that a methodologically conservative philosopher views as ones that must be vindicated within any proper process of philosophical reflection.¹⁵ The most well-known example of Kant's conservatism is in the so-called Argument from Geometry in the Transcendental Aesthetic.¹⁶ Here the argument schema in the Transcendental Exposition of Space is clear enough. Kant claims that

¹⁴ E.g. see Bx, Bxv-xvii, A4/B8, B4-5, B15, B20, A39/B55-6, A94/B127-8.

¹⁵ Cf. (G. E. Moore 1939; Kant 1784/2014; Kierkegaard 1843/2006).

¹⁶ For a sample of the relevant discussion see (Allais 2010; H. E. Allison 2004; Guyer 1987; Shabel 2004).

- (i) If transcendental idealism were not true, then the known propositions of geometry would lose their distinct modal status;
- (ii) The propositions of geometry cannot lose that status,

Therefore,

- (iii) Transcendental idealism must be true.

The argument is perhaps not compelling even if one were to accept the second premise. The motivation for accepting the conditional in the first premise is the thought that ontologically real items can only be passively received via sensory experience, the latter which is incapable of conveying necessary truths. Therefore if space were an ontologically real item then what we would learn of it would only hold the status of contingently true universal generalizations at best. My aim here is not to analyse or evaluate the argument but only to point to its obvious surface features.¹⁷ Kant's explicit claim is that since we possess certain mathematical knowledge, we can motivate our metaphysical theories in accordance with the fact of that possession. Any metaphysical position, no matter how intuitive, must be rejected if it is incompatible with the fact of that possession; a metaphysical position, no matter how counter-intuitive, must be accepted if it is necessary to explain the fact of that possession.

The Argument from Geometry has not fared well in general because it is thought to hinge upon Kant's commitment to the claim that there is but one possible geometry, Euclidean geometry, and that it properly characterizes physical space. It is now known that neither of these claims is true. It is important to note that Kant interweaves his commitments in physics to his philosophical argumentation in other well-known areas of the First *Critique*.¹⁸ Kant highlights two claims in the B Introduction, Lavoisier's Law of the Conservation of Matter and Newton's Third Law of Motion:

I will adduce only a couple of propositions as examples, such as the proposition that in all alterations of the corporeal world the quantity of matter remains unaltered, or that in all

¹⁷ There are some differing readings of the strategy of the Transcendental Aesthetic. Allison for example argues that the preceding Metaphysical Exposition is sufficient for Kant's idealist conclusions (Allison 2004); Allais argues that Kant's claim is that if transcendental idealism were false, then the propositions of geometry would lack referents (and presumably a truth-value) which is different from the claim that they would lose their modal status (Allais 2010). I'm inclined towards Guyer's reading (Guyer 1987) here nonetheless (cf. (Shabel 2004)).

¹⁸ For discussion of Kant's Philosophy of science and the impact of science in general within his philosophy see (Brittan 1978; Buchdahl 1969; Cohen 2009; Friedman 1992; McLaughlin 1990; Watkins 2001).

communication of motion effect and counter-effect must always be equal. In both of these not only the necessity, thus their *a priori* origin, but also that they are synthetic propositions is clear. (B17)

The principle of the First Analogy in the B-edition is stated as the claim that ‘[i]n all change of appearances substance persists, and its quantum is neither increased nor diminished in nature. (A182/B224).¹⁹ The argument for the necessity of the concept of substance for the possibility of experience is specifically adapted to make clear that the principle is meant to vindicate the Law of the Conservation of Matter. The very idea that the substratum of appearance does not go out of being during change is meant to have as its direct corollary the thought that the quantum of whatever makes up that substance cannot either decrease. Kant is clear that in arguing for this claim he is far from contradicting the ordinary commitments of our perceptual phenomenology. Rather he suggests that “at all times not merely the philosopher but even the common understanding has presupposed this persistence as a substratum of all change in the appearances, and has also always accepted it as indubitable...”(A184/B227). It is with regard to these specific claims that Kant states that ‘the understanding is itself the source of the laws of nature’ and that while the claim is ‘contradictory and strange’ (A144, cf. A127) it must nevertheless be accepted, since in his view it is the only means for preserving both the idea of their being laws of nature such as the Law of the Conservation of Matter at all as well as the commitments of everyday experience.

The position I am attributing to Kant is not uncontroversial. A fuller defence of the image of Kant I am presented cannot be made here. Many Kant scholars would claim that my view attributes to Kant what Karl Ameriks has called a ‘strongly regressive’ strategy, one whereby Kant presupposes *a priori* scientific claims for his arguments.²⁰ Interpreting Kant in this way, it is feared, risks presenting the Critical Philosophy as an apology for Newtonianism. Ameriks claims this is a mistake. Kant’s project surely involves reconciling his Newtonian commitments with the implicit philosophical commitments of the everyday experience of ordinary folk. However, we are not to understand the reconciliation as the one that have been presenting it here, *i.e.* as an insistent vindication of specific propositions inherited from the sciences. Rather, Ameriks claims that Kant’s view is that “one can rather work primarily to determine a

¹⁹ For discussion of the First Analogy, see (Addis 1963; Cleve 1979; Van Cleve 1979; Sacks 2006; Ward 2001)

²⁰ (Ameriks 2003, Introduction, 7).

positive and balanced *philosophical* relation *between* the distinct frameworks of our manifest and scientific images”.²¹ Ameriks’s use of Sellars’s terminology is evocative here, since it suggests that Kant might have seen the activity of philosophy as that of negotiating apparent discrepancies between our scientific and manifest worldviews.²² Kant’s investigations can be seen as trying, among other things, to clarify the basic meaning and metaphysical presuppositions of Newtonian axioms, and yet, since his investigations first provide a general ground for causality, they do not— unlike “scientism”—simply take the objective truth of the scientific principles themselves as an absolute first premise (Ameriks 2001, 34). Instead, we should take it that ‘[s]cientific theory, elementary common knowledge, and philosophical interpretation are thus all intertwined in a process of reflective equilibrium’ (Ameriks 2001, 35).

If we understand the process of transcendental philosophy as adopting the process of reflective equilibrium, in balancing maximal coverage of the intuitive data with a selection of general principles, then we should expect that we might find some statement of the notion that no particular claim is in principle immune to revision in the light of theoretical reflection.²³ To my knowledge there is no such claim to be found in Kant’s writings. Certainly it seems that Kant thought the opposite in the case of the practical philosophy. Kant’s steadfast commitment was that no amount of philosophical reasoning could displace the disposition to regard ourselves as free, or of human beings possessing an innate dignity, of there being a *God*, etc.²⁴ Moreover what we *can* find are explicit claims that the most sceptical theorist Kant envisaged himself would have abandoned his sceptical theories if they entail the rejection of certain forms of *a priori* cognition. Kant says as much about Hume, in claiming that Hume failed to realize that his own scepticism could be generalized to destabilize mathematical knowledge, had he realized that mathematics is a body of synthetic judgments (*Prolegomena*, 4: 272, *Critique of Practical Reason*, 5: 13). For Kant, the actuality of *a priori* cognition – in the form of mathematical cognition – presents a fixed data point impervious to theoretical leverage. The method of reflective equilibrium has been criticized for the disproportionate weighting of initially assumed intuitive data points, and Kant would be open to criticism were his claim merely that we ought to give a high regard to the claims of Newtonian physics and Euclidean

²¹ (Ameriks 2001, 33). Many of the same points are repeated in (Ameriks 2000, Ch. 1).

²² (Sellars 1963).

²³ For the origins of reflective equilibrium as a methodology see (Goodman 1955; Rawls 1971). For a recent overview of its problems and prospects, see (Cath 2016).

²⁴ See for example A830-1, B858-9.

geometry.²⁵ But his claim is that certain sceptical theories can be refuted simply on the grounds that they make mathematical *a priori* cognition impossible, indicating that his view is that no theoretical reflection could dislodge these initially assumed data points. Any philosophical approach that adopts that view cannot be characterized as engaged in reflective equilibrium. It is certainly the case that Kant's – truly remarkable – ambition in the First *Critique* is to show that the intimate and largely implicit conceptual understanding of every human being's own ordinary perceptual experience reflects traditional ontological concepts which in turn underpin core scientific principles. Kant's approach is triply conservative in that it aims to vindicate traditional ontology, familiar phenomenology, and Newtonian science within a single inquiry.

4. Strawson's Descriptive Metaphysics

Strawson's project of descriptive metaphysics, outlined in *Individuals*, is famously indebted to elements of Kant's Critical project.²⁶ Descriptive metaphysics, Strawson claims, is the project of describing 'the actual structure of our thought about the world' in contrast to revisionary metaphysics, which is concerned to produce a better structure'.²⁷ However, the distinction does not track a descriptive/normative distinction – instead descriptive metaphysics aims at outlining not just the 'actual' but the necessary structure of thought about the world. So described, it is noteworthy that such a project explicitly makes no claims at all on the structure of the world itself, but rather only our thought about it. One might presume that the special concern of revisionary metaphysics is that it can possibly identify 'better' and 'worse' metaphysical models, where the difference is marked just in terms of its accuracy in representing the world itself. Descriptive metaphysics in one sense then brackets this question. Strawson says that thinking of revisionary metaphysics as exhaustive of the form of inquiry in general would be a 'massive blunder':

²⁵ See (Cath 2016) for discussion.

²⁶ Strawson also identifies Aristotle as a precursor (Strawson 1959, 9).

²⁷ (Strawson 1959, 9). For discussion of descriptive metaphysics see (Burt 1963; Haack 1979; Macdonald 2007).

For there is a massive central core of human thinking which has no history – or none recorded in histories of thought; there are categories and concepts which, in their most fundamental character, change not at all. (Strawson 1959, 10)

Again the implied contrast with revisionary metaphysics would be that it is importantly tied to historical circumstances in that it takes its prerogative to integrate relevant information to inform its models.

It is striking that Strawson retains the Kantian thought that the elements that constitute the unrevisable part of human thinking are those elements that are also the most ordinary. He claims that they are the ‘commonplaces of the least refined thinking; and yet are the indispensable core of the conceptual equipment of the most sophisticated human beings’ (Strawson 1959, 10). A familiar argument from Chapter One of *Individuals* is that a specifically spatiotemporal framework is a necessary condition of any conceptual scheme that is capable of individuating particulars.²⁸ I will forego an examination of the details of the argument just to draw attention to the familiar features of its conservatism. Strawson begins with the claim that the human being’s conceptual scheme is one that represents the ‘world as containing particular things some of which are independent of ourselves’, that fundamentally ‘our ontology comprises objective particulars’ (Strawson 1959, 15). The conservatism emerges at the level of the *conclusion* in the claim that a specifically spatiotemporal domain is required in order to maintain the coherence of the initial premise. This claim, though perhaps open to question by the philosopher, is one that is no less intimate to ordinary experience than the initial premise.

There is of course a long-standing debate on the anti-sceptical force of these arguments that I will not address here.²⁹ Nor will I discuss in detail how we ought to understand the use of these arguments in the context of Strawson’s philosophical programme.³⁰ Instead I hope just to use this sketch of a Kant-inspired transcendental strategy to illuminate two different strands within Kant’s own use of such arguments. On the one hand, Kant aimed, as Strawson did, to illuminate the necessary conditions of human beings’ representation of the world in its most general structure. On the other hand, Kant aimed, as Strawson did not, to present that representational structure as in

²⁸ (Strawson 1959, 25). For some discussion see (Cassam 1997, 2005, 1997; Harrison 1970).

²⁹ The *locus classicus* is (Stroud 1968). For further discussion see (Stroud 1984, 1994; Stern 2000, 2007).

³⁰ I turn to this however in fn. 32. For some relevant discussion see my (Callanan 2011).

principle exclusively capable of reflecting the determinate structure of empirical reality. In *The Bounds of Sense*, Strawson sets out this understanding of Kant's insights:

One who accepts not only the distinctions, but the accompanying account of metaphysics, might be supposed to congratulate Kant on having done quite a good job for the presuppositions of Newtonian physics and even to recommend him as a model for any successor-metaphysician willing to undertake the same job for quantum and relativity physics (Strawson 1995, 73).

Strawson characterizes this view as effectively construing Kant as a revisionary metaphysician, thereby missing the crucial other dimensions of his strategy:

Accepting this view would amount to giving up the idea that we may find in the *Principles* further elaboration of the general conclusions of the 'Transcendental Deduction' into more detailed statements of generally necessary conditions of the possibility of any experience of objective reality such as we can render intelligible to ourselves (Strawson 1995, 73).

Strawson notes that even if we grant that Kant mistook scientific propositions for absolutes then it "does not follow, from his making this mistake, that there are no statable necessary conditions of the possibility of experience in general" (Strawson 1995, 74). Strawson is correct that Kant's commitment to transcendental conditions of experience can be articulated without appeal to their connection to Newtonian physics, and so Kant's commitment to the latter cannot by itself invalidate the former. The problem that this point obscures is that, as I have been arguing, Kant's commitment to the idea that Newtonian principles are reflected in those transcendental conditions is his means of securing the entry point to empirical realism. If one eschews this final commitment, one requires an account of how it is that transcendental conditions of experience can and do reflect the structure of empirical reality.

Even if descriptive metaphysics is understood as giving up on this ambition to reflect empirical reality, it faces a related problem in how we are to integrate the input of scientific theory with the transcendental conditions of experience. Strawson hints at an account in *The Bounds of Sense* when he suggests that there might be a "formal relation" between scientific principles and transcendental conditions, i.e. if "the presuppositions of a particular kind of science were, for instance, rather specific forms of the necessary conditions of experience" (Strawson 1995, 74). One might wonder how one might justify a claim to the effect that for any given scientific theory, its presuppositions must reflect

the transcendental conditions on experience. In responding to a worry about how descriptive metaphysics copes with scientific theory change, Strawson acknowledges that our conceptual vocabulary can and must be continually modified by the input of the sciences without this threatening the project:

Yet there is a core of human conceptual equipment from which all the modifications start, which we cannot dispense with and of which it has been my effort to give an at least partial description. Any such attempt, as the history of philosophy shows, is likely to be to some extent impure, in so far as it is liable to be affected by the state of knowledge and the general climate of at the time at the which the attempt is made. (The most striking example of this is provided by Kant's over-confident faith in Newtonian physics.) But the attempt itself is worth making all the same. ('Replies' in (Strawson, Sen, and Verma 1995, 410))

Strawson's methodological conservatism, I would suggest, is directed towards the thought that *no* scientific inquiry could displace ordinary commitment to claims such as these. It is his commitment to the reality of this core that motivates the need for descriptive metaphysics, to the justification of the very idea of an invariant core within the structure of human thinking. Strawson motivates this position in direct opposition to the Kantian conception of the project, however. While Kant thought that the project was required to vindicate Newtonian physics, Strawson acknowledges, it can be reformulated otherwise. By rendering the conceptual core as the necessary conditions of all theory-revision in general, the conceptual core is invulnerable to the vicissitudes of theory-revision.³¹ If the project of descriptive metaphysics were successful it would follow that the necessary conditions of thinking about the world also afford the necessary originating conditions for scientific theory construction. It does not follow, however, that the theories constructed must conform to those initial conditions. It seems eminently plausible to maintain that a unified spatiotemporal framework is a necessary condition of our experience – and *a fortiori* of our scientific theory construction practices – while allowing the possibility that a scientific theory might be formulated under those

³¹ A similar claim is made in *Skepticism and Naturalism: Some Varieties*, where Strawson claims that any change to our world-view would nevertheless always remain “a human world-picture: a picture of a world of physical objects (bodies) in space and time including human observers capable of action and of acquiring and imparting knowledge (and error) both of themselves and each other and of whatever else is to be found in nature” (Strawson 1985, 27).

conditions that nevertheless claimed that a spatiotemporal framework is not a necessary feature of empirical reality.³²

5. Conclusion: Conservatism and Science

I have claimed that while a certain methodological conservatism is a hallmark of both Kant and Strawson's projects, though they each represent and defend very different forms of conservatism. While Kant and Strawson are both methodological conservatives, Kant's conservatism is motivated by the need to vindicate particular scientific commitments; Strawson's conservatism is motivated by the need to avoid such commitments. Neither example of the general shared strategy – i.e. that of deploying transcendental arguments in aid of a methodological conservatism – is without its problems in their respective conceptions. Kant's strategy is of course infamously vulnerable to its contingent commitments to specific historically-situated scientific claims. While Kant's appeal to shared structures of human experience is his means to the end of securing those scientific claims, for Strawson the identification of an invariant core of human thinking about the world is an end in itself. Kant's own end, that of providing a metaphysical vocabulary for his scientific worldview, is dismissed by Strawson as an unfortunately co-instantiated disposition towards revisionary metaphysics. Yet, as I have tried to suggest, Kant's tight connecting of the manifest and

³² I don't mean to imply that Strawson is unaware of this feature of his project or that he lacks strategies for addressing it. The argument of 'Freedom and Resentment' for example seems to include a claim that we can't make sense of how a scientifically-informed determinism might undermine our recourse to reactive attitudes, at least not without forgoing conceptualizing ourselves as forming 'human society' (Strawson 1974, 24). My complaint is only that descriptive metaphysics both lacks and needs an account as to *why* this is the case, if it is true. As an anonymous reviewer rightly points out to me, a version of this issue is explicitly addressed in Strawson's 'Perception and its Objects'. There Strawson tentatively suggests the relativity and parity of the common-sense and scientific standpoints, and criticizes the 'hardliner' scientific realist for whom the latter standpoint is 'superior' (Strawson 1988, 112). Strawson claims that without such appeals to relativism, the scientific realist is committed to claim that the commonsense picture of experienced objects is a necessary and moreover ineliminable enabling condition for their own theorizing against the fundamental accuracy of that very picture. Thus Strawson concludes that this position must conclude that 'our thought is condemned to incoherence' albeit an incoherence 'we can perfectly live with and could not perfectly well live without' (Strawson 1988, 112). An evaluation of these kinds of defences is beyond the scope of this paper – my aim here has only been to emphasise that metaphilosophical manoeuvres of just this kind, e.g. presenting a choice between relativism and the merits or otherwise of living with a self-conception of human thinking as condemned to incoherence, are required by the methodological conservatism of descriptive metaphysics.

scientific images was his attempt to soothe a reasonable worry that they might lack a connection at all. As Euler had pointed out, the metaphysician who prioritised the intuitions generated by the manifest image displayed what he and Kant saw as a disturbing tendency to downgrade the relevance of scientific theories in relation to other epistemic commitments. In rejecting Kant's scientistic concerns, Strawson also eschews one philosophical narrative about how the structure of ordinary human cognition is at least in principle compatible with the results of scientific inquiry.

Stroud's well-known critique of Strawson's use of transcendental arguments points out that if one forgoes extra philosophical support – such as the tenets of transcendental idealism – then one is left with a strategy that does not even address the task of explaining how or even whether transcendental conditions afford epistemic contact with an ontologically independent world at all. Even if one accepts this criticism of descriptive metaphysics, a related tension can be generated within a more modestly framed project of descriptive metaphysics. If one considers descriptive metaphysics as merely the project of tracing the structure of thinking about the world, one still is left with the issue of the reconciliation of the manifest and scientific images. As seen above, at various points Strawson gestures at how descriptive metaphysics might be hoped to constrain or at least be compatible with scientific outcomes. However, the essential character of the project of descriptive metaphysics is premised on the notion that the grounds that determine the most general features of human thinking are independent of any particular scientific claims. Yet if these are indeed independent forms of inquiry, then there is no obvious sense in which the results of scientific inquiry are at all constrained by the demands of descriptive metaphysics. It seems perfectly possible to imagine, for instance, that a scientific inquiry undertaken within the constraints of thinking about an objective world as one of spatiotemporal particulars embroiled in causal relations with each other might nevertheless ultimately conclude with results that speak in favour of the unreality of time or causation or some other essential aspect of that conceptual framework. Even if one brackets the question of the inference to reality, the Strawsonian project has a question of how to effect an internal reconciliation of the claims of descriptive metaphysics with the outcomes of scientific inquiry.

The use of transcendental argumentation as a means to Strawson's conservatism could be viewed as a hindrance rather than a help here. Were the respective inquiries to generate opposed outcomes, there are scant resources within descriptive metaphysics to explain how to relate or prioritize those outcomes. If, though, scientific outcomes were

to be viewed as epistemically recommended *over* the claims of descriptive metaphysics – as would seem possible in at least some cases – then the fact that the claims of descriptive metaphysics are secured by transcendental argumentation might be thought to exacerbate the problem. Were a scientific outcome to oppose a claim of descriptive metaphysics, then it would follow that a successful transcendental argument would establish that we are *rationally compelled* to think of things in ways that we also think are less epistemically recommended. This is not to say that the determined descriptive metaphysician cannot bring other considerations to bear to ameliorate this concern. Yet were one to do so, those reflections would plausibly be ones that go beyond the resources of descriptive metaphysics itself and instead constitute some further philosophical reflections on the status of the results of descriptive metaphysics within a further synoptic world-view.³³

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³³ Part of this paper was delivered at a conference on Kant’s method and its reception in Frankfurt in 2015. I am grateful to Stefano Bacin, Alfredo Ferrarin, Guido Kreis and especially Gabriele Gava for discussion of some of these themes at that event. I am very grateful to an anonymous reviewer for this journal for detailed comments that greatly clarified my claims here.

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